

HUME FERGUS

THE SILENT
HOUSE

Fergus Hume

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CHAPTER I

THE TENANT OF THE SILENT HOUSE

Lucian Denzil was a briefless barrister, who so far departed from the traditions of his brethren of the long robe as not to dwell within the purlieus of the Temple. For certain private reasons, not unconnected with economy, he occupied rooms in Geneva Square, Pimlico; and, for the purposes of his profession, repaired daily, from ten to four, to Serjeant's Inn, where he shared an office with a friend equally briefless and poor.

This state of things sounds hardly enviable, but Lucian, being young and independent to the extent of £300 a year, was not dissatisfied with his position. As his age was only twenty-five, there was ample time, he thought, to succeed in his profession; and, pending that desirable consummation, he cultivated the muses on a little oatmeal, after the fashion of his kind. There have been lives less happily circumstanced.

Geneva Square was a kind of backwater of the great river of town life which swept past its entrance with speed and clamour

without disturbing the peace within. One long, narrow street led from a roaring thoroughfare into a silent quadrangle of tall grey houses, occupied by lodging-house keepers, city clerks and two or three artists, who represented the Bohemian element of the place. In the centre there was an oasis of green lawn, surrounded by rusty iron railings the height of a man, dotted with elms of considerable age, and streaked with narrow paths of yellow gravel.

The surrounding houses represented an eminently respectable appearance, with their immaculately clean steps, white-curtained windows, and neat boxes of flowers. The windows glittered like diamonds, the door-knobs and plates shone with a yellow lustre, and there were no sticks, or straws, or waste paper lying about to mar the tidy look of the square.

With one exception, Geneva Square was a pattern of all that was desirable in the way of cleanliness and order. One might hope to find such a haven in some somnolent cathedral town, but scarcely in the grimy, smoky, restless metropolis of London.

The exception to the notable spotlessness of the neighborhood was No. 13, a house in the centre of the side opposite to the entrance. Its windows were dusty, and without blinds or curtains, there were no flower-boxes on the ledges, the steps lacked whitewash, and the iron railings looked rusty for want of paint. Stray straws and scraps of paper found their way down the area, where the cracked pavement was damp with green slime. Such beggars as occasionally wandered into the square, to the scandal

of its inhabitants, camped on the doorstep; and the very door itself presented a battered, dissolute appearance.

Yet, for all its ill looks and disreputable suggestions, those who dwelt in Geneva Square would not have seen it furbished up and occupied for any money. They spoke about it in whispers, with ostentatious tremblings, and daunted looks, for No. 13 was supposed to be haunted, and had been empty for over twenty years. By reason of its legend, its loneliness and grim appearance, it was known as the Silent House, and formed quite a feature of the place. Murder had been done long ago in one of its empty, dusty rooms, and it was since then that the victim walked. Lights, said the ghost-seers, had been seen flitting from window to window, groans were sometimes heard, and the apparition of a little old woman in brocaded silk and high-heeled shoes appeared on occasions. Hence the Silent House bore an uncanny reputation.

How much truth there was in these stories it is impossible to say; but sure enough, in spite of a low rental, no tenant would take No. 13 and face its ghostly terrors. House and apparition and legend had become quite a tradition, when the whole fantasy was ended in the summer of '95 by the unexpected occupation of the mansion. Mr. Mark Berwin, a gentleman of mature age, who came from nobody knew where, rented No. 13, and established himself therein to lead a strange and lonely life.

At first, the gossips, strong in ghostly tradition, declared that the new tenant would not remain a week in the house; but as

the week extended into six months, and Mr. Berwin showed no signs of leaving, they left off speaking of the ghost and took to discussing the man himself. In a short space of time quite a collection of stories were told about the newcomer and his strange ways.

Lucian heard many of these tales from his landlady. How Mr. Berwin lived all alone in the Silent House without servant or companion; how he spoke to none, and admitted no one into the mansion; how he appeared to have plenty of money, and was frequently seen coming home more or less intoxicated; and how Mrs. Kebby, the deaf charwoman who cleaned out Mr. Berwin's rooms, declined to sleep in the house because she considered that there was something wrong about her employer.

To such gossip Denzil paid little attention, until his skein of life became unexpectedly entangled with that of the strange gentleman. The manner of their meeting was unforeseen and peculiar.

One foggy November night, Lucian, returning from the theatre, shortly after eleven o'clock, dismissed his hansom at the entrance to the square and walked thereinto through the thick mist, trusting to find his way home by reason of two years' familiarity with the precincts. As it was impossible to see even the glare of the near gas lamp in the murky air, Lucian felt his way cautiously along the railings. The square was filled with fog, dense to the eye and cold to the feel, so that Lucian shivered with the chill, in spite of the fur coat over his evening clothes.

As he edged gingerly along, and thought longingly of the fire and supper awaiting him in his comfortable rooms, he was startled by hearing a deep, rich voice boom out almost at his feet. To make the phenomenon still more remarkable, the voice shaped itself into certain well-known words of Shakespeare:

"Oh!" boomed this *vox et præterea nihil* in rather husky tones, "Oh! that a man should put an enemy in his mouth to steal away his brains!" And then through the mist and darkness came the unmistakable sound of sobs.

"God bless me!" cried Lucian, leaping back, with shaken nerves. "Who is this? Who are you?"

"A lost soul!" wailed the deep voice, "which God will not bless!" And then came the sobbing again.

It made Denzil's blood run cold to hear this unseen creature weeping in the gloom. Moving cautiously in the direction of the sound, he stumbled against a man with his folded arms resting on the railings, and his face bent down on his arms. He made no attempt to turn when Lucian touched him, but with downcast head continued to weep and moan in a very frenzy of self-pity.

"Here!" said the young barrister, shaking the stranger by the shoulder, "what is the matter with you?"

"Drink!" stuttered the man, suddenly turning with a dramatic gesture. "I am an object lesson to teetotalers; a warning to toppers; a modern helot made shameful to disgust youth with vice."

"You had better go home, sir," said Lucian sharply.

"I can't find home. It is somewhere hereabout, but where, I

don't know."

"You are in Geneva Square," said Denzil, trying to sharpen the dulled wits of the man.

"I wish I was in No. 13 of it," sighed the stranger. "Where the deuce is No. 13? Not in this Cloudeuckooland, anyhow."

"Oh!" cried Lucian, taking the man's arm. "Come with me. I'll lead you home, Mr. Berwin."

Scarcely had the name passed his lips than the stranger drew back suddenly, with a hasty exclamation. Some suspicion seemed to engender a mixture of terror and defiance which placed him on his guard against undue intimacy, even when some undefined fear was knocking at his heart. "Who are you?" he demanded in a steadier tone. "How do you know my name?"

"My name is Denzil, Mr. Berwin, and I live in one of the houses of this square. As you mention No. 13, I know you can be none other than Mr. Mark Berwin, the tenant of the Silent House."

"The dweller in the haunted house," sneered Berwin, evidently relieved, "who stays there with ghosts, and worse than ghosts."

"Worse than ghosts?"

"The phantoms of my own sins, young man. I have sowed folly, and now I am reaping the crop. I am – " Here his further speech was interrupted by a fit of coughing, which shook his lean figure severely. At its conclusion he was so exhausted that he was forced to support himself against the railings. "A portion of the crop," he murmured.

Lucian was sorry for the man, who seemed scarcely capable of looking after himself, and he thought it unwise to leave him in such a plight. At the same time, he was impatient of lingering in the heart of the clammy fog at such a late hour; so, as his companion seemed indisposed to move, he caught him again by the arm without ceremony. The abrupt action seemed to waken again the fears of Berwin.

"Where would you take me?" he asked, resisting the gentle force used by Lucian.

"To your own house. You will be ill if you stay here."

"You are not one of them?" asked the man suddenly.

"One of whom?"

"One of those who wish to harm me?"

Denzil began to think he had to do with a madman, and to gain his ends he spoke to him in a soothing manner, as he would to a child: "I wish to do you good, Mr. Berwin," said he gently. "Come to your home."

"Home! home! Ah, God, I have no home!"

Nevertheless, he gathered himself together, and with his arm in that of his guide, stumbled along in the thick, chill mist. Lucian knew the position of No. 13 well, as it almost faced the lodgings occupied by himself, and by skirting the railings with due caution, he managed to half lead, half drag his companion to the house. When they stood before the door, and Berwin had assured himself that he was actually home by the use of his latch-key, Denzil wished him a curt good-night. "And I should advise

you to go to bed at once," he concluded, turning to descend the steps.

"Don't go! Don't go!" cried Berwin, seizing the young man by the arm. "I am afraid to go in by myself – all is so dark and cold! Wait until I get a light!"

As the creature's nerves seemed to be unhinged by over-indulgence in alcohol, and he stood gasping and shivering on the threshold like some beaten animal, Lucian took compassion on him.

"I'll see you indoors," said he, and striking a match, stepped into the darkness after the man. The hall of No. 13 seemed to be almost as cold as the world without, and the trifling glimmer of the lucifer served rather to reveal than dispel the surrounding darkness. The light, as it were, hollowed a gulf out of the tremendous gloom and made the house tenfold more ghostly than before. The footsteps of Denzil and Berwin sounding on the bare boards – for the hall was uncarpeted – waked hollow echoes, and when they paused the silence which ensued seemed almost menacing. The grim reputation of the mansion, its gloom and silence, appealed powerfully to the latent superstition of Lucian. How much more nearly, then, would it touch the shaken and excited nerves of the tragic drunkard who dwelt continually amid its terrors!

Berwin opened a door on the right-hand side of the hall and turned up the light of a handsome oil-lamp which had been screwed down pending his arrival. This lamp was placed on a

small square table covered with a white cloth and a dainty cold supper. The young barrister noted that the napery, cutlery, and crystal were all of the finest; that the viands were choice; that champagne and claret were the beverages. Evidently Berwin was a luxurious gentleman and indulgent to his appetites.

Lucian tried to gain a long look at him in the mellow light, but Berwin kept his face turned away, and seemed as anxious now for his visitor to go as he had been for him to enter. Denzil, quick in comprehension, took the hint at once.

"I'll go now, as you have the light burning," said he. "Good-night."

"Good-night," replied Berwin shortly, and added to his discourtesy by letting Lucian find his way out alone.

And so ended the barrister's first meeting with the strange tenant of the Silent House.

CHAPTER II

SHADOWS ON THE BLIND

The landlady of Denzil was a rather uncommon specimen of the class. She inclined to plumpness, was lively in the extreme, wore very fashionable garments of the brightest colours, and – although somewhat elderly – still cherished a hope that some young man would elevate her to the rank of a matron.

At present, Miss Julia Greeb was an unwedded damsel of forty summers, who, with the aid of art, was making desperate but ineffectual efforts to detain the youth which was slipping from her. She pinched her waist, dyed her hair, powdered her face, and affected juvenile dress of the white frock and blue sash kind. In the distance she looked a girlish twenty; close at hand various artifices aided her to pass for thirty; and it was only in the solitude of her own room that her real age was apparent. Never did woman wage a more resolute fight with Time than did Miss Greeb.

But this was the worst and most frivolous side of her character, for she was really a good-hearted, cheery little woman, with a brisk manner, and a flow of talk unequalled in Geneva Square. She had been born in the house she occupied, after the death of her father, and had grown up to assist her mother in ministering to the exactions of a continuous procession of lodgers. These

came and went, married and died; but not one of the desirable young men had borne Miss Greeb to the altar, so that when her mother died the fair Julia almost despaired of attaining to the dignity of wifehood. Nevertheless, she continued to keep boarders, and to make attempts to captivate the hearts of such bachelors as she judged weak in character.

Hitherto all her efforts had been more or less of a mercantile character, with an eye to money; but when Lucian Denzil appeared on the scene, the poor little woman really fell in love with his handsome face. But, in strange contrast to her other efforts, Miss Greeb never for a moment deemed that Lucian would marry her. He was her god, her ideal of manhood, and to him she offered worship, and burnt incense after the manner of her kind.

Denzil occupied a bedroom and sitting-room, both pleasant, airy apartments, looking out on to the square. Miss Greeb attended to his needs herself, and brought up his breakfast with her own fair hands, happy for the day if her admired lodger conversed with her for a few moments before reading the morning paper. Then Miss Greeb would retire to her own sitting-room and indulge in day dreams which she well knew would never be realised. The romances she wove herself were even more marvellous than those she read in her favourite penny novelettes; but, unlike the printed tales, her romance never culminated in marriage. Poor brainless, silly, pitiful Miss Greeb; she would have made a good wife and a fond mother, but by

some irony of fate she was destined to be neither; and the comedy of her husband-hunting youth was now changing into the lonely tragedy of disappointed spinsterhood. She was one of the world's unknown martyrs, and her fate merits tears rather than laughter.

On the morning after his meeting with Berwin, the young barrister sat at breakfast, with Miss Greeb in anxious attendance. Having poured out his tea, and handed him his paper, and ascertained that his breakfast was to his liking, Miss Greeb lingered about the room, putting this straight and that crooked, in the hope that Lucian would converse with her. In this she was gratified, as Denzil wished to learn details about the strange man he had assisted on the previous night, and he knew that no one could afford him more precise information than his brisk landlady, to whom was known all the gossip of the neighbourhood. His first word made Miss Greeb flutter back to the table like a dove to its nest.

"Do you know anything about No. 13?" asked Lucian, stirring his tea.

"Do I know anything about No. 13?" repeated Miss Greeb in shrill amazement. "Of course I do, Mr. Denzil. There ain't a thing I don't know about that house. Ghosts and vampires and crawling spectres live in it – that they do."

"Do you call Mr. Berwin a ghost?"

"No; nor nothing half so respectable. He is a mystery, sir, that's what Mr. Berwin is, and I don't care if he hears me commit myself so far."

"In what way is he a mystery?" demanded Denzil, approaching the matter with more particularity.

"Why," said Miss Greeb, evidently puzzled how to answer this leading question, "no one can find out anything about him. He's full of secrets and underhand goings on. It ain't respectable not to be fair and above board – that it ain't."

"I see no reason why a quiet-living old gentleman should tell his private affairs to the whole square," remarked Lucian drily.

"Those who have nothing bad to conceal needn't be afraid of speaking out," retorted Miss Greeb tartly. "And the way in which Mr. Berwin lives is enough to make one think him a coiner, or a thief, or even a murderer – that it is!"

"But what grounds have you to believe him any one of the three?"

This question also puzzled the landlady, as she had no reasonable grounds for her wild statements. Nevertheless, she made a determined attempt to substantiate them by hearsay evidence. "Mr. Berwin," said she in significant tones, "lives all alone in that haunted house."

"Why not? Every man has the right to be a misanthrope if he chooses."

"He has no right to behave so, in a respectable square," replied Miss Greeb, shaking her head. "There's only two rooms of that large house furnished, and all the rest is given up to dust and ghosts. Mr. Berwin won't have a servant to live under his roof, and Mrs. Kebby, who does his charing, says he drinks awful.

Then he has his meals sent in from the Nelson Hotel round the corner, and eats them all alone. He don't receive no letters, he don't read no newspapers, and stays in all day, only coming out at night, like an owl. If he ain't a criminal, Mr. Denzil, why does he carry on so?"

"He may dislike his fellow-men, and desire to live a secluded life."

Miss Greeb still shook her head. "He may dislike his fellow-men," she said with emphasis, "but that don't keep him from seeing them – ah! that it don't."

"Is there anything wrong in that?" said Lucian, contemptuous of these cobweb objections.

"Perhaps not, Mr. Denzil; but where do those he sees come from?"

"How do you mean, Miss Greeb?"

"They don't go in by the front door, that's certain," continued the little woman darkly. "There's only one entrance to this square, sir, and Binders, the policeman, is frequently on duty there. Two or three nights he's met Mr. Berwin coming in after dark and exchanged friendly greetings with him, and each time Mr. Berwin has been alone!"

"Well! well! What of that?" said Denzil impatiently.

"This much, Mr. Denzil, that Binders has gone round the square, after seeing Mr. Berwin, and has seen shadows – two or three of them – on the sitting-room blind. Now, sir," cried Miss Greeb, clinching her argument, "if Mr. Berwin came into the

square alone, how did his visitors get in?"

"Perhaps by the back," conjectured Lucian.

Again Miss Greeb shook her head. "I know the back of No. 13 as well as I know my own face," she declared. "There's a yard and a fence, but no entrance. To get in there you have to go in by the front door or down the aiery steps; and you can't do neither without coming past Blinders at the square's entrance, and that," finished Miss Greeb triumphantly, "these visitors don't do."

"They may have come into the square during the day, when Blinders was not on duty."

"No, sir," said Miss Greeb, ready for this objection. "I thought of that myself, and as my duty to the square I have inquired – that I have. On two occasions I've asked the day policeman, and he says no one passed."

"Then," said Lucian, rather puzzled, "Mr. Berwin cannot live alone in the house."

"Begging your pardon, I'm sure," cried the pertinacious woman, "but he does. Mrs. Kebby has been all over the house, and there isn't another soul in it. No, Mr. Denzil, take it what way you will, there's something that ain't right about Mr. Berwin – if that's his real name, which I don't believe it is."

"Why, Miss Greeb?"

"Just because I don't," replied the landlady, with feminine logic. "And if you think of having anything to do with this mystery, Mr. Denzil, I beg of you not to, else you may come to something as is too terrible to consider – that you may."

"Such as – "

"Oh, I don't know," cried Miss Greeb, tossing her head and gliding towards the door. "It ain't for me to say what I think. I am the last person in the world to meddle with what don't concern me – that I am." And thus ending the conversation, Miss Greeb vanished, with significant look and pursed-up lips.

The reason of this last speech and rapid retreat lay in the fact that Miss Greeb could bring no tangible charge against her opposite neighbour; and therefore hinted at his complicity in all kinds of horrors, which she was quite unable to define save in terms more or less vague.

Lucian dismissed such hints of criminality from his mind as the outcome of Miss Greeb's very lively imagination; yet, even though he reduced her communications to bare facts, he could not but acknowledge that there was something queer about Mr. Berwin and his mode of life. The man's self-pity and self-condemnation; his hints that certain people wished to do him harm; the curious episode of the shadows on the blind – these things engaged the curiosity of Denzil in no ordinary degree; and he could not but admit to himself that it would greatly ease his mind to arrive at some reasonable explanation of Berwin's eccentricities.

Nevertheless, he held that he had no right to pry into the secrets of the stranger, and honourably strove to dismiss the tenant of No. 13 and his tantalising environments from his mind. But such dismissal of unworthy curiosity was more difficult to

effect than he expected.

For the next week Lucian resolutely banished the subject from his thoughts, and declined to discuss the matter further with Miss Greeb. That little woman, all on fire with curiosity, made various inquiries of her gossips regarding the doings of Mr. Berwin, and in default of reporting the same to her lodger, occupied herself in discussing them with her neighbours. The consequence of this incessant gossip was that the eyes of the whole square fixed themselves on No. 13 in expectation of some catastrophe, although no one knew exactly what was going to happen.

This undefinable feeling of impending disaster communicating itself to Lucian, stimulated his curiosity to such a pitch that, with some feeling of shame for his weakness, he walked round the square on two several evenings in the hope of meeting Berwin. But on both occasions he was unsuccessful.

On the third evening he was more fortunate, for having worked at his law books until late at night, he went out for a brisk walk before retiring to rest. The night was cold, and there had been a slight fall of snow, so Lucian wrapped himself up well, lighted his pipe, and proceeded to take the air by tramping twice or thrice round the square. Overhead the sky was clear and frosty, with chill glittering stars and a wintry moon. A thin covering of snow lay on the pavement, and there was a white rime on the bare branches of the central trees.

On coming to the house of Berwin, the barrister saw that the sitting-room was lighted up and the curtains undrawn, so that

the window presented a square of illuminated blind. Even as he looked, two shadows darkened the white surface – the shadows of a man and a woman. Evidently they had come between the lamp and the window, and so, quite unknowingly, revealed their actions to the watcher. Curious to see the end of this shadow pantomime, Lucian stood still and looked intently at the window.

The two figures seemed to be arguing, for their heads nodded violently and their arms waved constantly. They retreated out of the sphere of light, and again came into it, still continuing their furious gestures. Unexpectedly the male shadow seized the female by the throat and swung her like a feather to and fro. The struggling figures reeled out of the radiance and Lucian heard a faint cry.

Thinking that something was wrong, he rushed up the steps and rang the bell violently. Almost before the sound died away the light in the room was extinguished, and he could see nothing more. Again and again he rang, but without attracting attention; so Lucian finally left the house and went in search of Blinders, the policeman, to narrate his experience. At the entrance of Geneva Square he ran against a man whom he recognised in the clear moonlight.

To his surprise he beheld Mark Berwin.

CHAPTER III

AN UNSATISFACTORY EXPLANATION

"Mr. Berwin!" cried Lucian, recognising the man. "Is it you?"

"Who else should it be?" replied Berwin, bending forward to see who had jostled him. "Who else should it be, Mr. Denzil?"

"But I thought – I thought," said the barrister, unable to conceal his surprise, "that is, I fancied you were indoors."

"Your fancy was wrong, you see. I am not indoors."

"Then who is in your house?"

Berwin shrugged his shoulders. "No one, so far as I know."

"You are mistaken, sir. There was a light in your room, and I saw the shadows of a man and a woman struggling together thrown on the blind."

"People in my house!" said Berwin, laying a shaking hand on the arm of Lucian. "Impossible!"

"I tell you it is so!"

"Come, then, and we will look for them," said Berwin in a tremulous voice.

"But they have gone by this time!"

"Gone!"

"Yes," said Denzil rapidly. "I rang the bell, as I fancied there was some fatal quarrel going on within. At once the light was put

out, and as I could attract no one to the door, I suppose the man and woman must have fled."

For a moment or so Berwin said nothing, but his grip on Lucian's arm relaxed, and he moved forward a few steps. "You must be mistaken, Mr. Denzil," said he in altered tones, "there can be no person in my house. I locked the door before I went out, and I have been absent at least two hours."

"Then I must be mad, or dreaming!" retorted Lucian, with heat.

"We can soon prove if you are either of the two, sir. Come with me and examine the house for yourself."

"Pardon me," said Denzil, drawing back, "it is none of my business. But I warn you, Mr. Berwin, that others are more curious than I am. Several times people have been known to be in your house while you were absent, and your mode of life, secretive and strange, does not commend itself to the householders in this neighbourhood. If you persist in giving rise to gossip and scandal, some busybody may bring the police on the scene."

"The police!" echoed the old man, now greatly alarmed, as would appear from his shaking voice. "No! no! That will never do! My house is my castle! The police dare not break into it! I am a peaceful and very unfortunate gentleman, who wishes to live quietly. All this talk of people being in my house is nonsense!"

"Yet you seemed afraid when I told you of the shadows," said Lucian pointedly.

"Afraid! I am afraid of nothing!"

"Not even of those who are after you?" hinted Denzil, recalling the conversation of the previous occasion.

Berwin gave a kind of eldritch shriek and stepped back a pace, as though to place himself on his guard. "What – what do you know about such – such things?" he panted.

"Only so much as you hinted at when I last saw you."

"Yes, yes! I was not myself on that night. The wine was in and the wit was out."

"The truth also, it would seem," said Lucian drily, "judging by your agitation then and now."

"I am an unfortunate gentleman," whimpered Berwin tremulously.

"If you will excuse me, sir, I shall leave you," said Lucian ceremoniously. "It seems to be my fate to hold midnight conversations with you in the cold, but I think this one had better be cut short."

"One moment," Mr. Berwin exclaimed. "You have been good enough to place me on my guard as to the talk my quiet course of life is causing. Pray add to your kindness by coming with me to my house and exploring it from attic to basement. You will then see that there are no grounds for scandal, and that the shadows you fancy you saw on the blind are not those of real people."

"They can't be those of ghosts, at all events," replied Lucian, "as I never heard, to my knowledge, that spirits could cast shadows."

"Well, come and see for yourself that the house is empty."

Warmly as this invitation was given, Lucian had some scruples about accepting it. To explore an almost unfurnished mansion with a complete stranger – and one with an ill reputation – at the midnight hour, is not an enterprise to be coveted by any man, however bold he may be. Still, Lucian had ample courage, and more curiosity, for the adventure, as the chance of it stirred up that desire for romance which belongs peculiarly to youth. Also he was anxious to satisfy himself concerning the blind shadows, and curious to learn why Berwin inhabited so dismal and mysterious a mansion. Add to these reasons a keen pleasure in profiting by the occurrence of the unexpected, and you will guess that Denzil ended by accepting the strange invitation of Berwin.

Being now fully committed to the adventure, he went forward with cool courage and an observant eye, to spy out, if possible, the secret upon which hinged these mysteries.

As on the former occasion, Berwin inducted his guest into the sitting-room, and here, as previously, a dainty supper was spread. Berwin turned up the lamp light and waved his hand round the luxuriously furnished room, pointing particularly to the space between table and window.

"The figures whose shadows you saw," said he, "must have struggled together in this space, so as to be between the lamp and the blind for the performance of their pantomime. But I would have you observe, Mr. Denzil, that there is no disturbance of the

furniture to show that such a struggle as you describe took place; also that the curtains are drawn across the window, and no light could have been thrown on the blind."

"The curtains were, no doubt, drawn after I rang the bell," said Lucian, glancing towards the heavy folds of crimson velvet which veiled the window.

"The curtains," retorted Berwin, stripping off his coat, "were drawn by me before I went out."

Lucian said nothing, but shook his head doubtfully. Evidently Berwin was trying, for his own ends, to talk him into a belief that his eyes had deceived him; but Denzil was too clear-headed a young man to be so gulled. Berwin's explanations and excuses only confirmed the idea that there was something in the man's life which cut him off from humanity, and which would not bear the light of day. Hitherto, Lucian had heard rather than seen Berwin; but now, in the clear light of the lamp, he had an excellent opportunity of observing both the man and his quarters.

Berwin was of medium height, and lean, with a clean-shaven face, hollow cheeks, and black, sunken eyes. His hair was grey and thin, his looks wild and wandering, and the hectic colouring of his face and narrow chest showed that he was far gone in consumption. Even as Lucian looked at him he was shaken by a hollow cough, and when he withdrew his handkerchief from his lips the white linen was spotted with blood.

He was in evening dress, and looked eminently refined, although worn and haggard in appearance. Denzil noted two

peculiar marks about him; the first, a serpentine cicatrice extending on the right cheek from lip almost to ear; the second, the loss of the little finger of the left hand, which was cut off at the first joint. As he examined the man a second and more violent fit of coughing shook him.

"You seem to be very ill," said Lucian, pitying the feebleness of the poor creature.

"Dying of consumption – one lung gone!" gasped Berwin. "It will soon be over – the sooner the better."

"With your health, Mr. Berwin, it is sheer madness to dwell in this rigorous English climate."

"No doubt," replied the man, pouring himself out a tumbler of claret, "but I can't leave England – I can't leave this house, even; but on the whole," he added, with a satisfied glance around, "I am not badly lodged."

Lucian agreed with this speech. The room was furnished in the most luxurious manner. The prevailing hue was a deep, warm red – carpet, walls, hangings, and furniture were all of this cheerful tint. The chairs were deep, and softly cushioned; on the walls were several oil paintings by celebrated modern artists; there were dwarf bookcases filled with well-chosen books, and on a small bamboo table near the fire lay magazines and papers.

The mantelpiece, reaching nearly to the ceiling, was of oak, framing mirrors of bevelled glass; and on the numerous shelves, cups, saucers, and vases of old and valuable china were placed. There was also a gilt clock, a handsome sideboard, and a neat

smoking-table, on which stood a cut-glass spirit-stand and a box of cigars. The whole apartment was furnished with taste and refinement, and Lucian saw that the man who owned such luxurious quarters must be possessed of money, as well as the capability of using it in the most civilised way.

"You have certainly all that the heart of man can desire in the way of material comforts," said he, looking at the supper table, which, with its silver and crystal and spotless covering, glittered like a jewel under the brilliant lamplight. "My only wonder is that you should furnish one room so finely and leave the others bare."

"My bedroom and bathroom are yonder," replied Berwin, pointing towards large folding doors draped with velvet curtains, and placed opposite to the window. "They are as well furnished as this. But how do you know the rest of this house is bare?"

"I can hardly help knowing it, Mr. Berwin. Your contrast of poverty and riches is an open secret in this neighbourhood."

"No one has been in my house save yourself, Mr. Denzil."

"Oh, I have said nothing. You turned me out so quickly the other night that I had no time for observation. Besides, I am not in the habit of remarking on matters which do not concern me."

"I beg your pardon," said Berwin weakly. "I had no intention of offending you. I suppose Mrs. Kebby has been talking?"

"I should think it probable."

"The skirling Jezebel!" cried Berwin. "I'll pack her off right away!"

"Are you a Scotchman?" asked Denzil suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" demanded Berwin, without replying.

"You used an essentially Scotch word – 'skirling.'"

"And I used an essentially American phrase – 'right away,'" retorted the man. "I may be a Scot, I may be a Yankee, but I would remind you that my nationality is my own secret."

"I have no wish to pry into your secrets," said Denzil, rising from the chair in which he had seated himself, "and in my turn I would remind you that I am here at your invitation."

"Don't take offense at a hasty word," said Berwin nervously. "I am glad of your company, although I seem rather brusque. You must go over the house with me."

"I see no necessity to do so."

"It will set your mind at rest regarding the shadows on the blind."

"I can trust my eyes," said Lucian, drily, "and I am certain that before I met you a man and a woman were in this room."

"Well," said Berwin, lighting a small lamp, "come with me and I'll prove that you are mistaken."

CHAPTER IV

MRS. KEBBY'S DISCOVERY

The pertinacity which Berwin displayed in insisting that Lucian should explore the Silent House was truly remarkable. He appeared to be bent upon banishing the idea which Denzil entertained that strangers were hiding in the mansion.

From attic to basement, from front to back premises, he led the way, and made Lucian examine every corner of the empty rooms. He showed him even the unused kitchen, and bade him remark that the door leading into the yard was locked and bolted, and, from the rusty condition of the ironwork, could not have been opened for years. Also, he made him look out of the window into the yard itself, with its tall black fence dividing it from the other properties.

This exploration finished, and Lucian being convinced that himself and his host were the only two living beings in the house, Berwin conducted his half-frozen guest back to the warm sitting-room and poured out a glass of wine.

"Here, Mr. Denzil," said he in good-natured tones, "drink this and draw near the fire; you must be chilled to the bone after our Arctic expedition."

Lucian willingly accepted both these attentions, and sipped his wine – it was particularly fine claret – before the fire, while

Berwin coughed and shivered, and muttered to himself about the cold of the season. When Lucian stood up to take his departure, he addressed him directly:

"Well, sir," said he, with a sardonic smile, "are you convinced that the struggling shadows on yonder blind were children of your heated fancy?"

"No," said Denzil stoutly, "I am not!"

"Yet you have seen that there is no one in the house!"

"Mr. Berwin," said Lucian, after a moment's thought, "you propose a riddle which I cannot answer, and which I do not wish to answer. I cannot explain what I saw to-night, but as surely as you were out of this house, some people were in it. How this affects you, or what reason you have for denying it, I do not ask. Keep your own secrets, and go your own way. I wish you good-night, sir," and Lucian moved towards the door.

Berwin, who was holding a full tumbler of rich, strong port, drank the whole of it in one gulp. The strong liquor reddened his pallid face and brightened his sunken eyes; it even strengthened his already sonorous voice.

"At least you can inform my good neighbours that I am a peaceful man, desirous of being left to lead my own life," he said urgently.

"No, sir! I will have nothing to do with your business. You are a stranger to me, and our acquaintance is too slight to warrant my discussing your affairs. Besides," added Lucian, with a shrug, "they do not interest me."

"Yet they may interest the three kingdoms one day," said Berwin softly.

"Oh, if they deal with danger to society," said Denzil, thinking his strange neighbour spoke of anarchistic schemes, "I would –"

"They deal with danger to myself," interrupted Berwin. "I am a hunted man, and I hide here from those who wish me ill. I am dying, as you see," he cried, striking his hollow chest, "but I may not die quickly enough for those who desire my death."

"Who are they?" cried Lucian, rather startled by this outburst.

"People with whom you have no concern," replied the man sullenly.

"That is true enough, Mr. Berwin, so I'll say good-night!"

"Berwin! Berwin! Ha! ha! A very good name, Berwin, but not for me. Oh, was there ever so unhappy a creature as I? False name, false friend, in disgrace, in hiding! Curse everybody! Go! go! Mr. Denzil, and leave me to die here like a rat in its hole!"

"You are ill!" said Lucian, amazed by the man's fury. "Shall I send a doctor to see you?"

"Send no one," cried Berwin, commanding himself by a visible effort. "Only go away and leave me to myself. 'Thou can'st not minister to a mind diseased.' Go! go!"

"Good-night, then," said Denzil, seeing that nothing could be done. "I hope you will be better in the morning."

Berwin shook his head, and with a silent tongue, which contrasted strangely with his late outcry, ushered Denzil out of the house.

As the heavy door closed behind him Lucian descended the steps and looked thoughtfully at the grim mansion, which was tenanted by so mysterious a person. He could make nothing of Berwin – as he chose to call himself – he could see no meaning in his wild words and mad behaviour; but as he walked briskly back to his lodgings he came to the conclusion that the man was nothing worse than a tragic drunkard, haunted by terrors engendered by over-indulgence in stimulants. The episode of the shadows on the blind he did not attempt to explain, for the simple reason that he was unable to find any plausible explanation to account therefor.

"And why should I trouble my head to do so?" mused Lucian as he went to bed. "The man and his mysteries are nothing to me. Bah! I have been infected by the vulgar curiosity of the Square. Henceforth I'll neither see nor think of this drunken lunatic," and with such resolve he dismissed all thoughts of his strange acquaintance from his mind, which, under the circumstances, was perhaps the wisest thing he could do.

But later on certain events took place which forced him to alter his determination. Fate, with her own ends to bring about is not to be denied by her puppets; and of these Lucian was one, designed for an important part in the drama which was to be played.

Mrs. Margery Kebby, who attended to the domestic economy of Berwin's house, was a deaf old crone with a constant thirst, only to be assuaged by strong drink; and a filching hand which was usually in every pocket save her own. She had neither

kith nor kin, nor friends, nor even acquaintances; but, being something of a miser, scraped and screwed to amass money she had no need for, and dwelt in a wretched little apartment in a back slum, whence she daily issued to work little and pilfer much.

Usually at nine o'clock she brought in her employer's breakfast from the Nelson Hotel, which was outside the Square, and while he was enjoying it in bed, after his fashion, she cleaned out and made tidy the sitting-room. Berwin then dressed and went out for a walk, despite Miss Greeb's contention that he took the air only at night, like an owl, and during his absence Mrs. Kebby attended to the bedroom. She then went about her own business, which was connected with the cleaning of various other apartments, and only returned at midday and at night to lay the table for Berwin's luncheon and dinner, or rather dinner and supper, which were also sent in from the hotel.

For these services Berwin paid her well, and only enjoined her to keep a quiet tongue about his private affairs, which Mrs. Kebby usually did until excited by too copious drams of gin, when she talked freely and unwisely to all the servants in the Square. It was to her observation and invention that Berwin owed his bad reputation.

Well-known in every kitchen, Mrs. Kebby hobbled from one to the other, gossiping about the various affairs of her various employers; and when absolute knowledge failed she took to inventing details which did no small credit to her imagination. Also, she could tell fortunes by reading tea-leaves and shuffling

cards, and was not above aiding the maid servants in their small love affairs.

In short, Mrs. Kebby was a dangerous old witch, who, a century back, would have been burnt at the stake; and the worst possible person for Berwin to have in his house. Had he known of her lying and prating she would not have remained an hour under his roof; but Mrs. Kebby was cunning enough to steer clear of such a danger in the most dexterous manner. She had a firm idea that Berwin had, in her own emphatic phrase, "done something" for which he was wanted by the police, and was always on the look out to learn the secret of his isolated life, in order to betray him, or blackmail him, or get him in some way under her thumb. As yet she had been unsuccessful.

Deeming her a weak, quiet old creature, Berwin, in spite of his suspicious nature, entrusted Mrs. Kebby with the key of the front door, so that she could enter for her morning's work without disturbing him. The sitting-room door itself was not always locked, but Berwin usually bolted the portal of his bedroom, and had invariably to rise and admit Mrs. Kebby with his breakfast.

The same routine was observed each morning, and everything went smoothly. Mrs. Kebby had heard of the blind shadows from several people, and had poked and pryed about all over the house in the hope of arriving at some knowledge of the substantial flesh and blood figures which cast them. But in this quest, which was intended to put money into her own pocket, she failed entirely; and during the whole six months of Berwin's

tenancy she never saw a living soul in No. 13 save her employer; nor could she ever find any evidence to show that Berwin had received visitors during her absence. The man was as great a mystery to Mrs. Kebby as he was to the square, in spite of her superior opportunities of learning the truth.

On Christmas Eve the old woman brought in a cold supper for Berwin, as usual, making several journeys to and fro between hotel and house for that purpose. She laid the table, made up the fire, and before taking her leave asked Mr. Berwin if he wanted anything else.

"No, I think not," replied the man, who looked wretchedly ill. "You can bring my breakfast to-morrow."

"At nine, sir?"

"At the usual time," answered Berwin impatiently. "Go away!"

Mrs. Kebby gave a final glance round to see that all was in order, and shuffled out of the room as fast as her rheumatism would let her. As she left the house eight o'clock chimed from the steeple of a near church, and Mrs. Kebby, clinking her newly-received wages in her pocket, hurried out of the square to do her Christmas marketing. As she went down the street which led to it, Blinders, a burly, ruddy-faced policeman, who knew her well, stopped to make an observation.

"Is that good gentleman of yours home, Mrs. Kebby?" he asked, in the loud tones used to deaf people.

"Oh, he's home," grumbled Mrs. Kebby ungraciously, "sittin' afore the fire like Solomon in all his glory. What d'ye want to

know for?"

"I saw him an hour ago," explained Blinders, "and I thought he looked ill."

"So he do, like a corpse. What of that? We've all got to come to it some day. 'Ow d'ye know but what he won't be dead afore morning? Well, I don't care. He's paid me up till to-night. I'm going to enj'y myself, I am."

"Don't you get drunk, Mrs. Kebby, or I'll lock you up."

"Garn!" grunted the old beldame. "Wot's Christmas Eve for, if it ain't for folk to enj'y theirselves? Y'are on duty early."

"I'm taking the place of a sick comrade, and I'll be on duty all night. That's my Christmas."

"Well! well! Let every one enj'y hisself as he likes," muttered Mrs. Kebby, and shuffled off to the nearest public house.

Here she began to celebrate the season, and afterwards went shopping; then she celebrated the season again, and later carried home her purchases to the miserable garret she occupied. In this den Mrs. Kebby, with the aid of gin and water, celebrated the season until she drank herself to sleep.

Next morning she woke in anything but an amiable mood, and had to fortify herself with an early drink before she was fit to go about her business.

It was almost nine when she reached the Nelson Hotel, and found the covered tray with Mr. Berwin's breakfast waiting for her; so she hurried with it to Geneva Square as speedily as possible, fearful of a scolding. Having admitted herself into the

house, Mrs. Kebby took up the tray with both hands, and pushed open the sitting-room door with her foot. Here, at the sight which met her eyes, she dropped the tray with a crash, and let off a shrill yell.

The room was in disorder, the table was overturned, and amid the wreckage of glass and china lay Mark Berwin, with outspread hands – stone dead – stabbed to the heart.

CHAPTER V

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Nowadays, events, political, social, and criminal, crowd so closely on one another's heels that what was formerly a nine days' wonder is scarcely marvelled at the same number of minutes. Yet in certain cases episodes of a mysterious or unexpected nature engage the attention of a careless world for a somewhat longer period, and provoke an immense amount of discussion and surmise. In this category may be placed the crime committed in Geneva Square; for when the extraordinary circumstances of the case became known, much curiosity was manifested regarding the possible criminal and his motive for committing so apparently useless a crime.

To add to the wonderment of the public, it came out in the evidence of Lucian Denzil at the inquest that Berwin was not the real name of the victim; so here the authorities were confronted with a three-fold problem. They had first to discover the name of the dead man; second, to learn who it was had so foully murdered him; and third, to find out the reason why the unknown assassin should have slain an apparently harmless man.

But these hidden things were not easily brought to light; and the meagre evidence collected by the police failed to do away with any one of the three obstacles – at all events, until after the

inquest. When the jury brought in a verdict that the deceased had been violently done to death by some person or persons unknown, the twelve good men and true stated the full extent of knowledge gained by Justice in her futile scramble after clues. Berwin – so called – was dead, his assassin had melted into thin air, and the Silent House had added a second legend to its already uncanny reputation. Formerly it had been simply haunted, now it was also blood-stained, and its last condition was worse than its first.

The dead man had been found stabbed to the heart by some long, thin, sharp-pointed instrument which the murderer had taken away with him – or perhaps her, as the sex of the assassin, for obvious reasons, could not be decided. Mrs. Kebby swore that she had left the deceased sitting over the fire at eight o'clock on Christmas Eve, and that he had then been fairly well, though far from enjoying the best of health. When she returned, shortly after nine, on Christmas morning, the man was dead and cold. Medical aid was called in at the same time as the police were summoned; and the evidence of the doctor who examined the body went to prove that Berwin had been dead at least ten hours; therefore, he must have been assassinated between the hours of eleven and twelve of the previous night.

Search was immediately made for the murderer, but no trace could be found of him, nor could it be ascertained how he had entered the house. The doors were all locked, the windows were all barred, and neither at the back nor in the front was there any

outlet left open whereby the man – if it was a man who had done the deed – could have escaped.

Blinders, the policeman on duty at the entrance of the square, gave evidence that he had been on duty there all night, and that although many servants and owners of houses belonging to the square had passed in from their Christmas marketings, yet no stranger had entered. The policeman knew every one, even to the errand-boys of the neighbourhood, who brought parcels of Christmas goods, and in many cases had exchanged greetings with the passers-by; but he was prepared to swear, and, in fact, did swear at the inquest, that no stranger either came into or went out of Geneva Square.

Also he deposed that when the traffic died away after midnight he had walked round the square, and had looked at every window, including that of No. 13, and had tried every door, also including that of No. 13, only to find that all was safe. Blinders declared on oath that he had not on Christmas Eve the slightest suspicion of the horrid tragedy which had taken place in the Silent House during the time he was on duty.

When the police took possession of the body and mansion, search was made in bedroom and sitting-room for papers likely to throw light on the identity of the victim, but in vain. No letters or telegrams, or even writing of any kind, could be discovered; there was no name in the dead man's books, no mark on his clothes, no initials on his linen.

The landlord of the house declared that the deceased had hired

the mansion six months before, but had given no references, and as the landlord was glad to let the haunted No. 13 on any terms, he had not insisted upon having them. The deceased, said the landlord, had paid a month's rent in advance in ready money, and at the end of every month he had discharged his liability in the same way. He gave neither cheque nor notes, but paid always in gold; and beyond the fact that he called himself Mark Berwin, the landlord knew nothing about him.

The firm who had furnished the rooms made almost the same report, quite as meagre and unsatisfactory. Mr. Berwin – so the deceased had given his name – had ordered the furniture, and had paid for it in gold. Altogether, in spite of every effort, the police were obliged to declare themselves beaten. They could not find out the name of the victim, and therefore were unable to learn his past life, or trace thereby if he had an enemy likely to harm him.

Beyond the report given by Lucian of his conversation with the man, which showed that Berwin certainly had some enemy whom he dreaded, there was nothing discovered to show reason for the committal of the crime.

Berwin – so called – was dead; he was buried under his assumed name, and there, so far as the obtainable evidence went, was an end to the strange tenant of the Silent House. Gordon Link, the detective charged with the conduct of the case, confessed as much to Denzil.

"I do not see the slightest chance of tracing Berwin's past,"

said he to the barrister. "We are as ignorant about him as we are of the name of the assassin."

"Are you sure there is no clue, Mr. Link?"

"Absolutely none; even the weapon with which the crime was committed cannot be found."

"You have searched the house?"

"Every inch of it, and with the result that I have found nothing. The surroundings of the case are most mysterious. If we do not identify the dead we cannot hope to trace the murderer. How the wretch got into the house is more than I can discover."

"It is strange," admitted Lucian thoughtfully, "yet in some secret way people were in the habit of entering the house, and Berwin knew as much; not only that, but he protected them from curiosity by denying that they even existed."

"I don't quite follow you, Mr. Denzil."

"I allude to the shadows on the blind, which I saw myself a week before the murder took place. They were those of a man and a woman, and must have been cast by bodies of flesh and blood. Therefore, two people must have been in Berwin's sitting-room on that night; yet when I met Berwin who was absent at the time – he denied that anyone could have entered his house without his knowledge. More, he actually insisted that I should satisfy myself as to the truth of this by examining the house."

"Which you did?"

"Yes, but found nothing; yet," said Lucian, with an air of conviction, "however the man and woman entered, they were in

the house."

"Then the assassin must have come in by the same way; but where that way can be, or how it can be found, is more than I can say."

"Does the landlord know of any secret passages?"

"No; I asked him," replied the detective, "but he stated that houses nowadays were not built with secret passages. When Berwin denied that anyone was in the house, was he afraid, Mr. Denzil?"

"Yes, he seemed to be nervous."

"And he told you he had enemies?"

"He hinted that there were people who wished to see him dead. From the way he spoke and the language he used I am satisfied that he was hiding from the vengeance of some one."

"Vengeance!" repeated Link, raising his eyebrows. "Is not that word a trifle melodramatic?"

"Perhaps; but to my mind there is more melodrama in actual life than people fancy. However, Mr. Link," added Lucian, "I have come to certain conclusions. Firstly, that Berwin was in hiding; secondly, that he saw people secretly who entered in some way we cannot discover; and thirdly, that to solve the problem it will be necessary to look into the past life of the dead man."

"Your third conclusion brings us round to the point whence we started," retorted Link. "How am I to discover the man's past?"

"By learning who he is, and what is his real name."

"An easy task," said the detective sarcastically, "considering

the meagre material upon which we have to work. And how is the business to be accomplished?"

"By advertisement."

"Advertisement!"

"Yes. I wonder the idea did not strike you before, seeing how often it is used in similar cases. Advertise a full description of the man who called himself Berwin, note his physical peculiarities and looks, and circulate such description by means of handbills and newspapers."

Link looked angry, and laughed rather contemptuously, as his professional pride was touched by the fact of being advised by an individual not of his calling.

"I am not so ignorant of my business as you think," he said sharply. "What you suggest has already been done. There are handbills describing the appearance of Berwin in every police office in the kingdom."

"In the newspapers, also?" asked Lucian, nettled by the detective's tone.

"No; it is not necessary."

"I don't agree with you. Many people in private life are not likely to see your handbills. I don't pretend to advise, Mr. Link," he added in soothing tones, "but would it not be wise to use the medium of the daily papers?"

"I'll think of it," said Link, too jealous of his dignity to give way at once.

"Oh, I quite rely on your discretion," said Denzil hastily. "You

know your own business best. But if you succeed in identifying Berwin, will you let me know?"

Link looked keenly at the young man.

"Why do you wish to know about the matter?" he asked.

"Out of simple curiosity. The case is so mysterious that I should like to watch you unravel it."

"Well," said Link, rather gratified by this tribute to his power, "I shall indulge your fancy."

The result of this conversation was that Lucian observed in the newspapers next day an advertisement describing the looks and name, and physical peculiarities of the deceased, with special mention of the loss of the left hand's little finger, and the strange cicatrice on the right cheek. Satisfied that the only way to learn the truth had been adopted by the authorities, Lucian impatiently waited for the development of the scheme.

Within the week he received a visit from the detective.

"You were right and I was wrong, Mr. Denzil," admitted Link generously. "The newspapers were of more use than the handbills. Yesterday I received a letter from a lady who is coming to see me to-morrow at my office. So if you care to be present at the interview you have only to say so."

"I should like it above all things," said Lucian eagerly. "Who is the lady?"

"A Mrs. Vrain, who writes from Bath."

"Can she identify the dead man?"

"She thinks she can, but, of course, she cannot be certain until

she sees the body. Going by the description, however," added Link, "she is inclined to believe that Berwin was her husband."

CHAPTER VI

MRS. VRAIN'S STORY

Denzil was much pleased with the courtesy of the detective Link in permitting him to gain, at first hand, further details of this mysterious case. With a natural curiosity, engendered by his short acquaintance with the unfortunate Berwin, he was most anxious to learn why the man had secluded himself from the world in Geneva Square; who were the enemies he hinted at as desirous of his death; and in what manner and for what reason he had met with so barbarous a fate at their hands. It seemed likely that Mrs. Vrain, who asserted herself to be the wife of the deceased, would be able to answer these questions in full; therefore, he was punctual in keeping the appointment at the office of Link.

He was rather astonished to find that Mrs. Vrain had arrived, and was deep in conversation with the detective, while a third person, who had evidently accompanied her, sat near at hand, silent, but attentive to what was being discussed. As the dead man had been close on sixty years of age, and Mrs. Vrain claimed to be his wife, Denzil had quite expected to meet with an elderly woman. Instead of doing so, however, he beheld a pretty young lady of not more than twenty-five, whose raiment of widow's weeds set off her beauty to the greatest advantage.

She was a charming blonde, with golden hair and blue eyes, and a complexion of rose-leaf hue. In spite of her grief her demeanour was lively and engaging, and her smile particularly attractive, lighting up her whole face in the most fascinating manner. Her hands and feet were small, her stature was that of a fairy, and her figure was perfect in every way.

Altogether, Mrs. Vrain looked like a sylph or a dainty shepherdess of Dresden china, and should have been arrayed in gossamer robes, rather than in the deep mourning she affected. Indeed, Lucian considered that such weeds were rather premature, as Mrs. Vrain could not yet be certain that the murdered man was her husband; but she looked so charming and childlike a creature that he forgave her being too eager to consider herself a widow. Perhaps with such an elderly husband her eagerness was natural.

From this charming vision Lucian's eyes wandered to the attentive third person, a rosy-cheeked, plump little man, of between fifty and sixty. From his resemblance to Mrs. Vrain – for he had the same blue eyes and pink-and-white complexion – Lucian guessed that he was her father, and such, indeed, proved to be the case. Link, on Lucian's entrance, introduced him to the sylph in black, who in her turn presented him to the silvery-haired, benevolent old man, whom she called Mr. Jabez Clyne.

At the first sound of their voices Lucian detected so pronounced a twang, and so curious a way of collocating words, as to conclude that Mrs. Vrain and her amiable parent hailed

from the States. The little lady seemed to pride herself on this, and indicated her republican origin in her speech more than was necessary – at least, Denzil thought so. But then, on occasions, he was disposed to be hyper-critical.

"Say, now," said Mrs. Vrain, casting an approving glance on Lucian's face, "I'm right down glad to see you. Mr. Link here was just saying you knew my husband, Mr. Vrain."

"I knew him as Mr. Berwin – Mark Berwin," replied Denzil, taking a seat.

"Just think of that now!" cried Mrs. Vrain, with a liveliness rather subdued in compliment to her apparel; "and his real name was Mark Vrain. Well, I guess he won't need no name now, poor man," and the widow touched her bright eyes carefully with a doll's pocket-handkerchief, which Lucian noted, somewhat cynically, was perfectly dry.

"Maybe he's an angel by this time, Lyddy," said Mr. Clyne, in a cheerful, chirping voice, "so it ain't no use wishing him back, as I can see. We've all got to negotiate kingdom-come some time or another."

"Not in the same way, I hope," said Lucian dryly. "But I beg your pardon, Link, I interrupt your conversation."

"By no means," replied the detective readily. "We had just begun when you entered, Mr. Denzil."

"And it wasn't much of a talk, anyhow," said Mrs. Vrain. "I was only replying to some stupid questions."

"Stupid, if you will, but necessary," observed Link, with

gravity. "Let us continue. Are you certain that this dead man is – or rather was – your husband?"

"I'm as sure as sure can be, sir. Berwin Manor is the name of our place near Bath, and it looks as though my husband called himself after it when he changed his colours. And isn't his first name Mark?" pursued the pretty widow. "Well, my husband was called Mark, too, so there you are – Mark Berwin."

"Is this all your proof?" asked Link calmly.

"I guess not, though it's enough, I should say. My husband had a mark on his right cheek – got it fighting a duel with a German student when he was having a high time as one of the boys at Heidelberg. Then he lost part of his little finger – left-hand finger – in an accident out West. What other proof do you want, Mr. Link?"

"The proofs you have given seem sufficient, Mrs. Vrain, but may I ask when your husband left his home?"

"About a year ago, eh, poppa?"

"You are overdoing it, Lyddy," corrected the father. "Size it up as ten months, and you'll do."

"Ten months," said Lucian suddenly, "and Mr. Berwin – "

"Vrain!" struck in Lydia, the widow, "Mark Vrain."

"I beg your pardon! Well, Mark Vrain took the house in Geneva Square six months back. Where was he during the other four?"

"Ask me something easier, Mr. Denzil. I know no more than you do."

"Did you not know where he went on leaving Berwin Manor?"

"Sakes! how should I? Mark and I didn't pull together nohow, so he kicked over the traces and made tracks for the back of beyond."

"And you might square it, Lyddy, by saying as 'twasn't you who upset the apple cart."

"Well, I should smile to think so," said Mrs. Vrain vigorously. "I was as good as pie to that old man."

"You did not get on well together?" said Link sharply.

"Got on as well as a cat hitched along with a dog. My stars! there was no living with him. If he hadn't left me, I'd have left him – that's an almighty truth."

"So the gist of all this is that Mr. Vrain left you ten months ago, and did not leave his address?"

"That's so," said the widow calmly. "I've not seen nor heard of him for most a year, till pop there tumbled across your paragraph in the papers. Then I surmised from the name and the missing finger and the scarred cheek, that I'd dropped right on to Mark. I wouldn't take all this trouble for any one else; no, sir, not me!"

"My Lyddy does not care about being a grass-widow, gentlemen."

"I don't mind being a grass-widow or a real one, so long as I know how to ticket myself," said the candid Lydia; "but seems to me there's no question that Mark's sent in his checks."

"I certainly think that this man who called himself Berwin was your husband," said Denzil, for Mrs. Vrain's eyes rested on him,

and she seemed to expect an answer.

"Well, then, that means I'm Mr. Vrain's widow?"

"I should say so."

"And entitled to all his pile?"

"That depends on the will," said Lucian dryly, for the light tone of the pretty woman jarred upon his ear.

"Oh, that's all right," replied Mrs. Vrain, putting a gold-topped smelling bottle to her nose. "I saw the will made, and know exactly how I come out. The old man's daughter by his first wife gets the manor and the rents, and I take the assurance money!"

"Was Mr. Berwin – I beg pardon, Vrain – was he married twice?"

"I should think so!" said Lydia. "He was a widower with a grown-up daughter when I took him to church. Well, can I get this assurance money?"

"I suppose so," said Link, "provided you can prove your husband's death."

"Sakes alive!" cried Mrs. Vrain briskly. "Wasn't he murdered?"

"The man called Berwin was murdered."

"Well, sir," said the rosy-cheeked Clyne, with more sharpness than might have been expected from his peaceful aspect, "and ain't Berwin Vrain?"

"It would seem so," replied Link coolly. "All your evidence goes to prove it, yet the assurance company may not be satisfied with the proof. I expect the grave will have to be opened, and

the remains identified."

"Ugh!" said Mrs. Vrain with a shrug, "how disgusting! I mean," she added, colouring as she saw that Lucian was rather shocked by her flippancy, "that sorry as I am for the old man, he wasn't a good husband to me, and corpses a week old ain't pleasant things to look on."

"Lyddy," interposed Clyne, hastening to obliterate, if possible, the impression made on the two men by this foolish speech, "how you do go on. But you know your heart is better than your tongue."

"It was, to put up so long with Mr. Vrain," said Lydia resentfully; "but I'm honest, if I'm nothing else. I guess I'm sorry that Vrain got stuck like a pig; but it wasn't my fault, and I've done my best to show respect by wearing black. But it is no good going on in this way, poppa, for I've no call to excuse myself to strangers. What I want to know is how I'm going to get the dollars."

"You'll have to see the assurance company about that," said Link coldly; "my business with you, Mrs. Vrain, is about this murder."

"I know nothing about it," retorted the widow. "I haven't set eyes on Mark for most a year."

"Have you any idea who killed him?"

"I guess not! How should I?"

"You might know if he had enemies."

"He," said Mrs. Vrain, with supreme contempt, "why, he

hadn't backbone enough for folks to get riz at him! He was half baked!"

"Crazy, that is," remarked Clyne; "always thought the world was against him, and folks wanted to get quit of him."

"He said he had enemies," hinted Lucian.

"You bet! He no doubt made out that all Europe was against him," said Clyne. "That was my son-in-law all over. Lyddy and he had a tiff, just like other married couples, and he clears out to lie low in an out-of-the-way shanty in Pimlico. I tell you, gentlemen, that Vrain had a chip out of his head. He fancied things, he did; but no one wanted to harm him that I know of."

"Yet he died a violent death," said Denzil gravely.

"That's a frozen fact, sir," cried Clyne, "and both Lyddy and I want to lynch the reptile as did it; but we neither of us know who laid him out."

"I'm sure I don't," said Mrs. Vrain in a weeping voice. "Every one that I knew was civil to him; he had no one who wanted to kill him when he left Berwin Manor. Why he went away, or how he died, I can't say."

"If you want to know how he died," explained Link, "I can tell you. He was stabbed."

"So the journals said; with a bowie!"

"No, not with a bowie," corrected Lucian, "but with some long, sharp instrument."

"A dagger?" suggested Clyne.

"I should be even more precise," said Denzil slowly. "I should

say a stiletto – an Italian stiletto."

"A stiletto!" gasped Mrs. Vrain, whose delicate pink colour had faded to a chalky white. "Oh! – oh! I – I – " and she fainted forthwith.

CHAPTER VII

THE ASSURANCE MONEY

Mrs. Vrain's fainting fit was of no great duration, and she shortly recovered her senses, but not her sprightliness. Her excuse was that the long discussion of her husband's murder, and the too precise details related to her by Link before Denzil's arrival, had so wrought on her nerves as to occasion her temporary indisposition.

This reason, which was a trifle weak, since she seemed to bear her husband's loss with great stoicism, awakened suspicions in Lucian's mind as to her truthfulness. However, these were too vague and confused to be put into words, so the young man remained silent until Mrs. Vrain and her father departed. This they did almost immediately, after the widow had given her London and country addresses to the detective, in case he should require her in the conduct of the case.

This matter being attended to, she left the room, with a parting smile and especial bow to Lucian.

Link smiled in his turn as he observed this Parthian shaft, the shooting of which was certainly out of keeping with Mrs. Vrain's character of a mourning widow.

"You seem to have made an impression on the lady, Mr. Denzil," he said, with a slight cough to conceal his amusement.

"Nonsense!" replied Lucian, his fair face crimsoning with vexation. "She seems to me one of those shallow women who would sooner flirt with a tinker than pass unnoticed by the male sex. I don't like her," he concluded, with some abruptness.

"On what grounds?"

"Well, she spoke very hardly about her husband, and seemed rather more concerned about this assurance money than his death. She is a flippant doll, with a good deal of the adventuress about her. I don't think," said the barrister significantly, "that she is altogether so ignorant of this matter as she pretends to be."

The detective raised his eyebrows. "You don't propose to accuse her of the murder?" he asked sceptically.

"Oh, no!" answered Denzil hastily. "I don't say she is as guilty as all that; but she knows something, or suspects something."

"How do you make that out?"

"She fainted at the mention of stiletto; and I am convinced that Vrain – as I suppose we must call him now – was killed with one. And again, Link, this woman admitted that she had married her elderly husband in Florence. Now, Florence, as you know, is an Italian town; a stiletto is an Italian weapon. Putting these two things together, what do you make of Mrs. Vrain's fainting?"

"I make nothing of it, Mr. Denzil. You are too suspicious. The woman had no reason to rid herself of her husband as you hint."

"What about the assurance money?"

"There is a motive there, certainly – a motive of gain. Still, I think you are making a mountain out of a molehill, for I am

satisfied that she knows no more who committed the crime than does the Pope himself."

"It is as well to look in every direction," said Lucian obstinately.

"Meaning that I should follow this clue you suggest, which has no existence save in your own fancy. Well, I'll keep my eye on Mrs. Vrain, you may be sure of that. It won't be difficult, as she will certainly stay in town until she identifies the body of her dead husband and gets the money. If she is guilty, I'll track her down; but I am certain she has nothing to do with the crime. If she had, it is not likely that she would enter the lion's den by coming to see me. No, no, Mr. Denzil; you have found a mare's nest."

Lucian shrugged his shoulders, and took up his hat to go.

"You may be right," said he reluctantly, "but I have my doubts of Mrs. Vrain, and shall continue to have them until she supplies a more feasible explanation of her fainting. In the meantime, I'll leave you to follow out the case in the manner you judge best. We shall see who is right in the long run," and Denzil, still holding to his opinion, took his departure, leaving Link confident that the young man did not know what he was talking about.

As the detective sat thinking over the late conversation, and wondering if he could shape any definite course out of it, Denzil put his head in at the door.

"I say, Link," he called out, "you'd better find out if Mrs. Vrain is really the wife of this dead man before you are guided by her story!" After which speech he hurriedly withdrew, leaving

Link to digest it at his leisure.

At first, Link was indignant that Denzil should deem him so easily hoodwinked as the speech implied. Afterwards he began to laugh.

"Wife!" said he to himself. "Of course she is the man's wife! She knows too much about him to be otherwise; but even granting that Denzil is right – which I don't for a moment admit – there is no need for me to prove the truth of his assumption. If this pretty woman is not the true wife of Berwin, or Vrain, or whatever this dead man's name actually may be, the assurance company will get at the rights of the matter before paying over the money."

Subsequent events reflected credit on this philosophical speech and determination of Mr. Link. Had Mrs. Vrain been an imposter, her house of cards would have been knocked down, as soon as reared, by the searching inquiry instituted by the Sirius Assurance Company. It appeared that the life of the late Mark Vrain was on the books of the company for no less a sum than twenty thousand pounds; and under the will this was to be paid over to Lydia Vrain, *née* Clyne. The widow, aided by her father – who was a shrewd business man, in spite of his innocent looks – and the family lawyer of the Vrains, went systematically to work to establish her own identity, the death of her husband, and her consequent right to the money.

The first thing to be done was to prove that the dead man was really Vrain. There was some little difficulty in obtaining an

order from the authorities for the opening of the grave and the exhumation of the body; but finally the consent of those in power was obtained, and there was little difficulty in the identification of the remains. The lawyer, Mr. Clyne, Mrs. Vrain herself, and several people brought up from Bath by the assurance company, swore that the corpse – buried under the false name of Berwin – was that of Mark Vrain, for decomposition had not proceeded so far but what the features could be recognised. There was even no need to unwrap the body from its cerements, as the face itself, and the scar thereon, were quite sufficient for the friends of the deceased to swear to the corpse. Thereupon the assurance company, on the fullest of evidence, was compelled to admit that their client was dead, and expressed themselves ready to pay over the money to Mrs. Vrain as soon as the will should be proved.

Pending the legal process necessary to do this, the widow made a great parade of her grief and affection for the dead man. She had the body re-enclosed in a new and sumptuous coffin, and removed the same to Berwin Manor, near Bath, where, after a short lapse of time, it was duly placed in the family vault of the Vrains.

The widow, having thus disposed of her husband, bethought herself of her stepdaughter, who at that time was on a visit to some friends in Australia. A long letter, giving full details, was despatched by Mrs. Vrain, and the daughter was requested, both by the widow and the lawyer, to come back to England at once and take up her abode in Berwin Manor, which, with its

surrounding acres, had been left to her under the will.

Matters connected with the death and its consequences having been disposed of thus far, Mrs. Vrain sat down, and, folding her hands, waited till such time as she would receive the assurance money, and begin a new life as a wealthy and fascinating widow. Every one said that the little woman had behaved very well, and that Vrain – weak-headed as he was supposed to be – had shown excellent judgment in dividing his property, real and personal, so equally between the two claimants. Miss Vrain, as became the child of the first wife, received the home and acres of her ancestors; while the second wife obtained the assurance money, which every one candidly admitted she quite deserved for having sacrificed her youth and beauty to an old man like Vrain. In those days, when all these details were being settled, the widow was the most popular personage in Bath.

Matters went smoothly with Mrs. Vrain in every respect. The will was duly proved, the twenty thousand pounds was duly paid over; so, finding herself rich, the widow came with her father to take up her abode in London. When settled there one of her first acts was to send a note to Lucian, telling him that she was in town. The good looks of the young man had made a considerable impression on Mrs. Vrain, and she appeared anxious to renew the acquaintance, although it had been so inauspiciously begun in the purlieus of the police courts.

On his part, Lucian lost no time in paying his respects, for after the searching inquiry conducted by the Sirius Assurance

Company, out of which ordeal Mrs. Vrain had emerged unscathed, he began to think that he had been too hasty in condemning the little widow. So he called upon her almost immediately after receiving the invitation, and found her, after the lapse of three months, as pretty as ever, and clothed in less heavy mourning.

"It's real sweet of you to call, Mr. Denzil," said she vivaciously. "I haven't seen anything of you since we met in Mr. Link's office. And sakes! have I not had a heap of trouble since then?"

"Your trouble has done you no harm, Mrs. Vrain. So far as your looks go, three minutes, rather than three months, might have passed."

"Oh, that's all right. I guess it's not good enough to cry one's self sick for what can't be helped. But I want to ask you, Mr. Denzil, how that policeman is progressing with the case."

"He has found out nothing," replied Lucian, shaking his head, "and, so far as I can see, there's not much chance of learning the truth."

"I never thought there was," said Mrs. Vrain, with a shrug. "Seems to me you don't get round much in this old country. Well, it don't seem as I can do much more. I've told all I know, and I've offered a reward of £500 to discover the man who stuck Mark. If he ain't found for dollars he won't be found at all."

"Probably not, Mrs. Vrain. It is now over three months since the crime was committed, and every day makes the chance of discovery less."

"But for all that, Diana Vrain's going on the trail, Mr. Denzil."

"Diana Vrain! Who is she?"

"My stepdaughter – Mark's only child. She was in Australia – out in the wild west of that country – and only lately got the news of her father's death. I got a letter from her last week, and it seems as she's coming back here to find out who laid her poppa out."

"I am afraid she'll not succeed," said Denzil dubiously.

"She'll do her best to," replied Mrs. Vrain, with a shrug. "She's as obstinate as a battery mule; but it's no use talking, she will have her own way," and dismissing the subject of Miss Vrain, the pretty widow, with an air of relief, talked on more frivolous subjects until Lucian took his departure.

CHAPTER VIII

DIANA VRAIN

Although over three months had elapsed since the murder of Mark Vrain, and the crime had been relegated to oblivion both by press and people, curiosity concerning it was still active in Geneva Square. The gossips in that talkative quarter had exhausted their tongues and imaginations in surmising who had committed the deed, and how it had been accomplished.

It was now known that the deceased had been of a good county family, who had left his pretty young wife in a fit of groundless suspicion; that he had no enemies; and had withdrawn to the Silent House to save himself from the machinations of purely imaginary beings. The general opinion was that Vrain had been insane; but even this did not explain the reason of his tragic and unforeseen death.

Since the murder the Silent House had acquired a tenfold interest in the eyes of all. The crime, added to its reputation for being haunted, invested it with horror; and its commonplace looks assumed to fanciful onlookers a grim and menacing aspect, in keeping with its blood-stained floor and ghostly rooms.

Disheartened by the late catastrophe, which had so greatly enhanced the already evil reputation of the house, the landlord did not attempt to relet it, as he knew very well that no tenant

would be bold enough to take it, even at a nominal rent. Mrs. Vrain had sold off the furniture of the two apartments which her unfortunate husband had inhabited, and now these were as bare and lonely as the rest of the rooms.

The landlord made no effort to furbish up or renovate the mansion, deeming that such expense would be useless; so No. 13, deserted by man, and cursed by God, remained vacant and avoided. People came from far and near to look at it, but no one entered its doors lest some evil fate should befall them. Yet, in strange contradiction to the horror it created in every breast, the houses on either side continued to be occupied.

Miss Greeb frequently took a peep across the way at the empty house, with its curtainless, dusty windows and smokeless chimneys. She had theorised often on the murder of Vrain, and being unable to come to any reasonable conclusion, finally decided that a ghost – the ghost which haunted the mansion – had committed the crime. In support of this fantastic opinion she related to Lucian at least a score of stories in which people foolishly sleeping in haunted rooms had been found dead in the morning.

"With black finger-marks on their throats," said Miss Greeb dramatically, "and looks of horror in their eyes, and everything locked up, just like it was in No. 13, to show that nothing but a ghost could have killed them."

"You forget, Miss Greeb," said Lucian flippantly, "poor Vrain was stabbed with a stiletto. Ghosts don't use material weapons."

"How do you know the dagger was a real one?" replied Miss Greeb, sinking her voice to a horrified whisper. "Was it ever seen? No! Was it ever found? No! The ghost took it away. Depend upon it, Mr. Denzil, it wasn't flesh and blood as made a spirit of that crazy Berwin."

"In that case, the ghostly criminal can't be hanged," said Denzil, with a laugh. "But it's all nonsense, Miss Greeb. I am astonished that a woman of your sense should believe in such rubbish."

"Wiser people than I have faith in ghosts," retorted the landlady obstinately. "Haven't you heard of the haunted house in a West End square, where a man and a dog were found dead in the morning, with a valet as gibbered awful ever afterwards?"

"Pooh! Pooh! That's a story of Bulwer Lytton's."

"It is not, Mr. Denzil – it's a fact. You can see the very house in the square for yourself, and No. 13 is just such another."

"Nonsense! Why, I'd sleep in No. 13 to-morrow night, just to prove that your ghostly fears are all moonshine."

Miss Greeb uttered a screech of alarm. "Mr. Denzil!" she cried, with great energy, "sooner than you should do that, I'd – I'd – well, I don't know what I'd do!"

"Accuse me of stealing your silver spoons and have me locked up," said Lucian, laughing. "Make yourself easy, Miss Greeb. I have no intention of tempting Providence. All the same, I don't believe for one minute that No. 13 is haunted."

"Lights were seen flitting from room to room."

"No doubt. Poor Vrain showed me over the house before he died. His candle explains the lights."

"They have been seen since his death," said Miss Greeb solemnly.

"Then, as a ghost, Vrain must be walking about with the old woman phantom who wears brocade and high-heeled shoes."

Miss Greeb, seeing that she had a sceptic to deal with, retreated with great dignity from the argument, but nevertheless to other people maintained her opinion, with many facts drawn from her imagination and from books on the supernatural compiled from the imagination – or, as the various writers called it – the experience of others. Some agreed with her, others laughed at her; but one and all acknowledged that, however it came about, whether by ghostly or mortal means, the murder of Vrain was a riddle never likely to be solved; and, with other events of a like nature and mystery, it was relegated to the list of undiscovered crimes.

After several interviews with Link, the barrister was also inclined to take this view of the matter. He found the detective quite discouraged in his efforts to find the assassin.

"I have been to Bath," said Link dismally. "I have examined, so far as I was able, into the past life of Vrain, but I can find nothing likely to throw light on the subject. He did not get on well with his wife, and left Bath ten months before the murder. I tried to trace where he went to, but could not. He vanished from Bath quite unexpectedly, and four months later turned up in Geneva

Square, as we know, but who killed him, or why he was killed, I can't say. I'm afraid I'll have to give it up as a bad job, Mr. Denzil."

"What! and lose a reward of five hundred pounds!" said Lucian.

"If it was five thousand, I must lose it," returned the dejected Link. "This case beats me. I don't believe the murderer will ever be run down."

"Upon my word, I am inclined to agree with you," said Denzil, and barrister and detective departed, each convinced that the Vrain case was ended, and that in the face of the insuperable obstacles presented by it there was not the slightest chance of avenging the murder of the unfortunate man. The reading of the mystery was beyond mortal powers to accomplish.

About the middle of April, nearly four months after the tragedy, Lucian received a letter containing an invitation which caused him no little astonishment. The note was signed Diana Vrain, and, having intimated that the writer had returned only that week from Australia, requested that Mr. Denzil would be kind enough to call the next day at the Royal John Hotel in Kensington. Miss Vrain ended by stating that she had a particular desire to converse with Mr. Denzil, and hoped that he would not fail to keep the appointment.

Wondering greatly how the lady – who was no doubt the stepdaughter referred to by Mrs. Vrain – had obtained his address, and why she desired to see him so particularly, Lucian,

out of sheer curiosity, obeyed the summons. Next day, at four o'clock – the appointed hour – he presented himself as requested, and, on giving his name, was shown immediately into the presence of his correspondent, who occupied a small private sitting-room.

When Miss Vrain rose to greet him, Lucian was amazed to see how beautiful and stately she was. With dark hair and eyes, oval face, and firm mouth, majestic figure and imperial gait, she moved towards him an apparent queen. A greater contrast to Mrs. Vrain than her stepdaughter can scarcely be imagined: the one was a frivolous, volatile fairy, the other a dignified and reserved woman. She also was arrayed in black garments, but these were made in the plainest manner, and showed none of the coquetry of woe such as had characterised Mrs. Vrain's elaborate costume. The look of sorrow on the face of Diana was in keeping with her mourning apparel, and she welcomed Lucian with a subdued courtesy which prepossessed him greatly in her favour.

Quick in his likes and dislikes, the young man was as drawn towards this beautiful, sad woman as formerly he had been repulsed by the feigned grief and ensnaring glances of silly Mrs. Vrain.

"I am much obliged to you for calling, Mr. Denzil," said Miss Vrain in a deep voice, rather melancholy in its tone. "No doubt you wondered how I obtained your address."

"It did strike me as peculiar, I confess," said Lucian, taking a chair to which she pointed, "but on considering the matter I

fancied that Mrs. Vrain had – "

"Mrs. Vrain!" echoed Diana in a tone of contempt. "No! I have not seen Mrs. Vrain since I returned, a week ago, to London. I got your address from the detective who examined into the death of my most unhappy father."

"You have seen Link?"

"Yes, and I know all that Link could tell me. He mentioned your name frequently in his narrative, and gave me to understand that on two occasions you had spoken with my father; therefore, I asked him to give me your address, so that I might speak with you personally on the matter."

"I am quite at your service, Miss Vrain. I suppose you wish to learn all that I know of the tragedy?"

"I wish for more than that, Mr. Denzil," said Diana quietly. "I wish you to help me in hunting down the assassin of my father."

"What! Do you intend to reopen the case?"

"Certainly; but I did not know that the case – as you call it – had been closed. I have come home from Australia especially to devote myself to this matter. I should have been in London long ago, but that out in Australia I was with some friends in a part of the country where it is difficult to get letters. As soon as Mrs. Vrain's letter about the terrible end of my father came to hand I arranged my affairs and left at once for England. Since my arrival I have seen Mr. Saker, our family lawyer, and Mr. Link, the detective. They have told me all they know, and now I wish to hear what you have to say."

"I am afraid I cannot help you, Miss Vrain," said Lucian dubiously.

"Ah! You refuse to help me?"

"Oh, no! no! I shall only be too glad to do what I can," protested Lucian, shocked that she should think him so hard-hearted, "but I know of nothing likely to solve the mystery. Both myself and Link have done our best to discover the truth, but without success."

"Well, Mr. Denzil," said Diana, after a pause, "they often say that a woman's wit can do more than a man's logic, so you and I must put our heads together and discover the guilty person. Have you no suspicion?"

"No. I have no suspicion," replied Lucian frankly. "Have you?"

"I have. I suspect – a lady."

"Mrs. Vrain?"

"Yes. How do you know I meant her?"

"Because at one time I suspected her myself."

"You suspected rightly," replied Diana. "I believe that Mrs. Vrain killed her husband."

CHAPTER IX

A MARRIAGE THAT WAS A FAILURE

Denzil did not reply at once to the accusation levelled by Diana at Mrs. Vrain, as he was too astonished at her vehemence to find his voice readily. When he did speak, it was to argue on the side of the pretty widow.

"I think you must be mistaken," he said at length.

"But, Mr. Denzil, you declared that you suspected her yourself!"

"At one time, but not now," replied Lucian decisively, "because at the time of the murder Mrs. Vrain was keeping Christmas in Berwin Manor."

"Like Nero fiddling when Rome was burning," retorted Diana sharply; "but you mistake my meaning. I do not say that Mrs. Vrain committed the crime personally, but she inspired and guided the assassin."

"And who is the assassin, in your opinion?"

"Count Hercule Ferruci."

"An Italian?"

"As you may guess from the name."

"Now, that is strange," cried Lucian, with some excitement, "for, from the nature of the wound, I believe that your father was

stabbed by an Italian stiletto."

"Aha!" said Diana, with satisfaction. "That strengthens the accusation I bring against Ferruci."

"And, again," continued Denzil, hardly listening to what she was saying, "when I mentioned my suspicion about the stiletto in the hearing of Mrs. Vrain, she fainted."

"Which showed that her guilty conscience pricked her. Oh, I am sure of it, Mr. Denzil! My stepmother and the count are the criminals!"

"Our evidence, as yet, is only circumstantial," said Lucian cautiously. "We must not jump to conclusions. At present I am completely in the dark regarding this foreigner."

"I can enlighten you, but it is a long story."

"The longer the better," said Denzil, thinking he could hear Diana speak and watch her face for hours without weariness. "I wish for all details, then I shall be in a better position to judge."

"What you say is only reasonable, Mr. Denzil. I shall tell you my father's history from the time he went to Italy some three years ago. It was in Italy – to be precise, in Florence – that he met with Lydia Clyne and her father."

"One moment," said Denzil. "Before you begin, will you tell me what you think of the couple?"

"Think!" cried Diana disdainfully. "I think they are a couple of adventurers; but she is the worst of the two. The old man, Jabez Clyne, I think moderately well of; he is a weak fool under the thumb of his daughter. If you only knew what I have suffered

at the hands of that golden-haired doll!"

"I should think you could hold your own, Miss Vrain."

"Not against treachery and lies!" retorted Diana fiercely. "It is not my habit to employ such weapons, but my stepmother used no others. It was she who drove me out of the house and made me exile myself to the Antipodes to escape her falseness. And it was she," added Miss Vrain solemnly, "who treated my father so ill as to drive him out of his own home. Lydia Vrain is not the doll you think her to be; she is a false, cruel, clever adventuress, and I hate her – I hate her with all my heart and soul!"

This feminine outburst of anger rather bewildered Denzil, who saw very plainly that Diana was by no means the lofty angel he had taken her to be in the first appreciation of her beauty. But her passion of the moment suited so well with her stately looks that she seemed rather a Margaret of Anjou defying York and his faction than an injured woman concerned with so slight a thing as the rebuke of one of her own sex for whom she had little love. Diana saw the surprise expressed on Lucian's face, and her own flushed a little with annoyance that she should have betrayed her feelings so openly. With a vexed laugh, she recovered her temper and composed demeanour.

"You see I am no saint, Mr. Denzil," she said, resuming her seat, for in her anger she had risen to her feet. "But even if I were one, I could not have restrained myself from speaking as I did. When you know my stepmother as well as I do – but I must talk calmly about her, or you will not understand my reasons for

thinking her concerned in the terrible fate of my poor father."

"I am all attention, Miss Vrain."

"I'll tell you all I know, as concisely as possible," she replied, "and you can judge for yourself if I am right or wrong. Three years ago my father's health was very bad. Since the death of my mother – now some ten years – he had devoted himself to hard study, and had lived more or less the life of a recluse in Berwin Manor. He was writing a history of the Elizabethan dramatists, and became so engrossed with the work that he neglected his health, and consequently there was danger that he might suffer from brain fever. The doctors ordered him to leave his books and to travel, in order that his attention might be distracted by new scenes and new people. I was to go with him, to see that he did not resume his studies, so, in an evil hour for us both, we went to Italy."

"Your father was not mad?" said Lucian, thinking of the extraordinary behaviour of Vrain in the square.

"Oh, no!" cried Diana indignantly. "He was a trifle weak in the head from overwork but quite capable of looking after himself."

"Did he indulge in strong drink?"

Miss Vrain looked scandalised. "My father was singularly abstemious in eating and drinking," she said stiffly. "Why do you ask such a question?"

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